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GO TO THE AUNT

The literary sluggard who should be roused to consider the ways of book-aunts would find that if he desires leading characters he must bestir himself almost as much as the overrated insect that emphasizes Solomon's exhortation. For in literature, though aunts-in-general abound, yet aunts-in-particular (individual, plot-moving aunts) are rare.

Perhaps the cause may lie in realism. The sister of a parent, however devoted, self-sacrificing, and entertaining she may be, is apt to practise her virtues and display her accomplishments in a background against which stands out Youth in its beauty, or strength, or soul-quiver. And just as the real aunt usually "fills in," so the story-aunt generally plays chorus, bank, hotel, and such other parts as the exigencies of the hero or heroine may demand.

The lady, however, meets her inglorious destiny in many ways and with varying degrees of personality. She may be as colorless, for instance, as one Mrs. Dorothy Somerset who was created solely to chaperon Thaddeus of Warsaw's half-brother's fiancée when an elopement to Scotland became necessary. Or she may—filler though she be—present as distinct an individuality as the stimulating "Mr. F.'s Aunt." "The major characteristics discoverable by the stranger in Mr. F.'s Aunt were extreme severity and grim taciturnity; sometimes interrupted by a propensity to offer remarks, in a deep warning voice, which, being totally uncalled for by anything said by anybody, and traceable to no association of ideas, confounded and terrified the mind."

Flora's "legacy" is one of a large group of background aunts: the amusing eccentric. For it is as a comedy element that the supernumerary relative appears oftenest. She fills parts that range from broad farce to delicate fancy. And the more spectacular she is the more certainly do we remember her. Miss Betsy Trotwood, for example, lives as an enemy of donkeys, not as the good woman who makes life rich for her nephew, or as one who has suffered more than most. And we do not forget

the marked peculiarities of the aunt of the matchless Sophia Western. The elder lady creates in the English novel the part of the assertive, pedantic scorner of mere man. "Either she had no inclinations or they had never been solicited," observes Fielding, "which last is very probable, for her masculine person, which was six feet high, added to her manner and learning, possibly prevented the other sex from regarding her, and notwithstanding her petticoats, in the light of a woman." Though denied beauty—the low-comedy aunt is apt to be ill favored—Mrs. Western enjoys a singular confidence in her other gifts. Yet in spite of her "intellects" this lady remains only an extra, an addition to the scenery which displays in relief the modesty and dutifulness of her niece, Sophia.

Of far less distinctness is Clarissa Harlowe's aunt, whom Richardson throws into his seven-volume novel for good measure. She exists merely to be written to, just as Ik Marvel's Aunt Tabithy lives only to be talked to, or Trollope's Aunt De Courcy to be related to. With still less excuse Peacock introduces an aunt into *Headlong Hall*,—solely, the reader suspects, to address her by name: Miss Brindle-mew Grimalkin Phœbe Tabitha Ap-headlong!

The elderly aunt who affects youth and charm and suitors may be met in scores of books. Even Scott, usually so respectful to the ladies, falls into temptation and in *Quentin Durward* makes of the Lady Hameline de Croye a ridiculous caricature. Sir Walter permits the Count of Crevecœur to refer to the aunt of the lovely Isabel as "that blundering, old, romantic, match-making, match-seeking idiot." Miss Rachel Wardour, in *Pickwick*, is of like calibre, and into the same pigeon-hole go the aunts in Irving's *Spectre Bridegroom*. Nearly akin is Mistress Tabitha Bramble in *Humphrey Clinker*—"a maiden lady of forty-five, exceeding starched, vain and ridiculous." She is a trial, naturally, to her sentimental niece, Lydia, but it is Mrs. Tabitha's own brother who calls her "a fantastical animal," and "the devil incarnate." Still another old maid caricature is that fearsome person, Mademoiselle d'Epine, in *La Neuvième de Colette*. Even at fifteen—the age when most of us thrilled over this romantic tale—we recognized that the aunt played

the opposite part to the niece's youth, beauty, and St. Joseph-directed impulse.

It is only occasionally that we find these broad comedy aunts busied about anything but amusing the reader, yet once in a while they combine that responsibility with a career. So, at least, did Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, to whose evening school went that young man, Pip,—previous, of course, to the announcement of his *Great Expectations*. His instructor was “a ridiculous old woman of limited means and unlimited infirmity who used to go to sleep from six to seven every evening in the society of youth who paid twopence per week each, for the improving opportunity of seeing her do it.” And this academy continued until Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt “conquered a confirmed habit of living, into which she had fallen.”

The best of the comedy aunts is, of course, the lady who presents, by the grace of her author, a delicate character-study. So finely drawn that they are almost indistinguishable are the Misses Pattern who are designed by George Meredith to act as a mirror for their nephew, the *Egoist*, and give back, though faintly, a reflection of any sentiment which he may cast in their direction. “Clara wondered whether inclination or Sir Willoughby had disciplined their individuality out of them and made them his shadows, his echoes.” On one occasion they come to Clara with a mission from Willoughby who fancies he has discovered the reason of Clara's unwillingness to marry him.

“‘And in saying your happiness, dear Clara, we have our Willoughby's in mind, which is dependent on yours.’

“‘Young wives naturally prefer to be the undisputed queens of their own establishments.’ It was hard to tell which was the completer dupe of these two echoes of one another in worship of a family idol.”

It seems ungracious, if not disrespectful, to cite Mrs. Poyser as a supernumerary aunt; but of course she is. Sin and sorrow and salvation might have worked upon the souls of certain men and women without Mrs. Poyser to reprove, to lament, and to encourage. But it would be a poorer world had Hetty's aunt not lived in it: she is an example of what perfection the background aunt may reach. And there are the Dodson aunts, and

Aunt Moss, each of whom is quite distinct, each entirely human, each an accessory to Maggie Tulliver.

All the Austen aunts are high comedy. There is wide scope for "examples" here: Jane Austen's novels may be said to abound in aunts as Gilbert White declared Selbourne to "abound in poor." In *Pride and Prejudice*, the dashing Elizabeth Bennett possesses for contrasting effect a common undesirable aunt and a refined congenial aunt. And, moreover, Elizabeth's Mr. Darcy can offer a relative of the same degree whose every word is a delight. She is at her best, perhaps, this Lady Catherine de Bough, in that last call paid by Elizabeth and Maria. "Her ladyship again inquired minutely into the particulars of their journey, gave them directions as to the best method of packing, and was so urgent on the necessity of placing gowns in the only right way, that Maria thought herself obliged on her return, to undo all the work of the morning and pack her trunk afresh." Well worth knowing, too, is Miss Bates, the aunt of Jane Fairfax, in *Emma*. The section of background allotted to Miss Bates is filled not by her deeds but by her words. Little recks she of Unity, but Sequence in all perfection is hers.

Many an unmarried aunt is pushed into a story to serve as a sweetly pathetic example of a postponed romance, or of no romance at all, or as a warning in regard to lost opportunities. ("So I thought once," said Aunt Mary, sadly.) I remember a particularly affecting instance of this sort in an old bound volume of magazines,—early seventies, I think. A pathetic, worn aunt offers advice to a gay, fresh niece. The maiden looks at the maiden-lady with honest wonder at her comprehension of a problem of sentiment. And the author adds tolerantly: "Seventeen and twenty-seven did not seem so far apart, after all." Miss Mitford's Aunt Martha, in *Our Village*, belongs to a still earlier generation. She finds her happiness not so much in giving counsel as in caring for and serving those around her. She would be too perfect, "But she is an old maid still, and certain small peculiarities hang about her."

As a physical support in emotional moments the aunt finds opportunity to be of service. In Cooper's *Spy*, Miss Peyton,

in the course of two pages, offers her own person four times as a retreat for her niece, Frances:—

“‘He’s lost! he’s lost!’ cried Frances, sinking into the arms of her aunt. . . .

“—but Frances, shrinking from his touch, hid her face in the bosom of her aunt. . . .

“‘It is—it is,’ whispered Frances, burying her face still deeper in the bosom of her aunt. . . .

“‘I speak in pity to myself,’ returned the brother, gently removing Frances from the arms of her aunt.”

But aunts are frequently expected to supply something more common than a resting place for stricken maidens, something more substantial than advice. Many an author creates these ladies merely to draw up a will, to write a Christmas check, or to offer “inducements” of various natures: trips abroad, college courses, family lace and jewels, opportunities. Thackeray realized the value of such a relative. It is in *Vanity Fair* that he sings the Rich Aunt: “Ah, gracious powers! I wish you would send me an old aunt—a maiden aunt—an aunt with a lozenge on her carriage, and a front of light coffee-colored hair—how my children should work work-bags for her, and my Julia and I would make her comfortable! Sweet, sweet vision! Foolish, foolish dream!”

When her mother’s sister has left a fortune to Emily St. Aubert, the lady has fulfilled her destiny; it is the niece who must cope with *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The Aunt March of *Little Women* is a source of supply. That tuneful Bohemian, Rudolphe, appreciates the true function of a near relative and sings to Mimi: “I have an aunt, a millionaire. If the good God wills to take her, you shall have a necklace far more fine,”—more fine, of course, than the new bonnet which graces Christmas Eve at the Momus Café. (There is a certain baldness about English. Rudolphe’s remark is innocuous enough in French or Italian.)

It is as a bank that Lady Martha Dormer figures in *The Children of the Abbey*. Amanda Malvina Fitzallen and Lord Mortimer are reunited after one of their not infrequent separations, brought about through the abduction of Amanda,

false reports of the marriage of both the lovers, by the intervention of their respective and irate fathers, and by other early-Victorian plot complications. When the hero and the heroine do meet, it is, naturally, a moment of high emotional tension.

"I may again call you my own Amanda!" cries the young noble; "again sketch scenes of felicity, and call upon you to realize them." [This, unfortunately, Amanda cannot do because Lord Cherbury—Mortimer's cruel father—wishes his son to marry another and wealthy maiden. Yet all is not lost.] "A sudden thought has just occurred: I have an aunt, the only remaining sister of Lord Cherbury, a generous, tender, exalted woman; I have ever been her particular favorite; my Amanda, I know, is the very kind of being she would select if the choice devolved upon her, for my wife . . . and from the generosity of her disposition, I have no doubt she would render the loss of Lady Euphrasia's [the other aspirant] fortune very immaterial to her brother. This is the only scheme I can possibly devise for the completion of our happiness, according to your notions, and I hope it meets your approbation."

"It appeared indeed a feasible one to Amanda." And, curiously enough, Lady Martha Dormer acquiesces in her nephew's highly practical suggestions and, later, Lord Mortimer is able to write to Amanda: "His lordship authorizes me to assure you he longs to receive you into his family, at once a boast and acquisition to it."

As somewhere to go, or to stay, the aunt is invaluable to fiction. Is it desirable to take the heroine from the hollowness of the city? Aunt-in-the-country stands ready to solve the problem. Is it advisable to wean the heroine from the narrowness of the country? Then aunt-in-the-city offers the required opportunity. In fact, in all questions touching removal, consult the nearest aunt. Or she serves as an explanation of long-past absences. When Lucy Desborough marries Richard Feverel he accounts for her superiority to her farmer-relatives by the fact that in her girlhood she spent some time "with her Aunt Desborough in France." Tom Sawyer's Aunt Polly finds a reason for being only in offering a base of operation, and inspiration, for her nephew.

Still another sort of background aunt is the one who personifies a quality, or embodies a theory. Of the first kind are the Alcott aunts. Even a child can read the tag attached to each of Rose's aunts: Aunt Clara—the World; Aunt Myra—the Grave; Aunt Jessie—the Home; Aunt Jane—the Mind; Aunt Peace and Aunt Plenty—just what their names suggest. To this group belong those aunts who represent sectional characteristics. Almost any magazine will offer an illustration of New England conscience, or Far-West enthusiasm, or Middle-West energy, or Southern languor,—all presented through the guise of a parent's sister. In the second group are the informative ladies in "Conduct Books" who supply to anxious and uncertain nieces and nephews full directions as to a choice of forks or a use of visiting cards. Religion, too, often stalks about in the background, forcing the unlucky aunt who gives it body, to preach or pray, to sing or sorrow according to the letter of the religious law for whose interpretation she is responsible.

And finally, we may find in the background such a relative as that "imaginary large aunt in the country" whose characteristics gave such pleasure to *Prue and I*.

"I would have her arrive by the late train at midnight," says Prue; "and when she had eaten some supper and had gone to her room, she should discover that she had left the most precious bundle of all in the cars, without whose contents she could not sleep, nor dress, and you would start to hunt for it."

"Yes, and when I am gone to the office in the morning . . . then our large aunt from the country would like to go shopping, and would want you for her escort. And she would cheapen tape at all the shops. . . . Then the comely clerks . . . would look at you, with their brows lifted, as if they said, 'Mrs. Prue, your large aunt had better stay in the country.'"

Now these ladies whose ways the sluggard might consider with slight inconvenience are fairly typical, it seems to me, of the background aunt. Her mission is to amuse, to warn, to subsidize, to offer local habitations, to point morals, and to supply instruction. Occasionally, however, an aunt occupies the foreground, and there a reformed sluggard may descry her: a protagonist. Down the centre of the stage she strides; the best

lines are hers; the action results from her gesture; even the niece and nephew take their cue from her. In full possession of humor and money, of homes and morals, an aunt may motivate a plot by a refusal to manipulate her equipment according to conventional methods.

Miss Crawley's obduracy in respect to Christian forgiveness and the plain duty of wealthy aunts is the impulse that sends Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, née Sharp, about her unethical business; Mrs. Reid's refusal of a home to her niece is the cause of Jane Eyre's long stay at Lowood where she is fitted for an exceptional career, and the same Mrs. Reid's deathbed confidence to Jane results in the appearance of a gentleman from Jamaica just in time to interrupt Jane's marriage to the fascinating, but perhaps unconventional, Mr. Rochester. Goldsmith's Mrs. Hardcastle controls the sub-plot of *She Stoops to Conquer*, for she commands the action of her niece, Constantia Neville, through the possession of the girl's jewels. The lachrymose Ellen Montgomery finds her progress through the wide, wide world arrested by her half-aunt, Miss Fortune Emerson, who conceals letters in an indefensible but plot-producing manner. And both Paul and Virginia might have lived the Psalmist's allotted span had not the aunt of Madame de la Tour demanded the immediate presence in Paris of her grandniece "on whom she would bestow a good education, procure for her a splendid marriage, and leave her the inheritance of her whole fortune." It was only common sense to accept an invitation with such an itemized list of advantages,—especially when the governor tactfully informed Virginia's mother: "Your aunt cannot live more than two years: of this I am assured by her friends. . . . Fortune does not visit us every day."

Anne Elliot, in *Persuasion*, is Jane Austen's only star aunt. Anne is in the middle of her duties as a mother's sister at the very moment when the long-lost lover returns. That is a thrilling scene where Captain Wentworth plucks the little Musgrove from Anne's back. Poor Anne! Youth is gone—she is nearly thirty—a new generation is growing up around her, she has settled into the performance of modest, elderly duties. And suddenly she finds herself on inspection, as it were. Captain

Wentworth is plainly "looking around." It is all very unexpected and embarrassing. But Anne bears close study. Her virtues have been emphasized—or perhaps produced—by daily contact with ingenious nieces and nephews. From the very beginning of their renewed acquaintance the Captain is struck by "the engaging mildness of her countenance." And even more is he charmed with her sensible conversation. To his friend, Captain Benwick, for example, Anne "ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study;—mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of our finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance."

Besides the many retiring and the few assertive aunts in fiction, there are certain ladies who exhibit an unwillingness to "fit in" anywhere. Among those who are guilty of frowardness in this respect are pseudo aunts (family friends and godparents, for instance); and a Southern before-the-war story is incomplete without a few Aunt Sukeys or Aunt Chloes as local color. And for lagniappe, there are exclamations—Aunt Jemima!; or bits of verse—Dr. Holmes's *My Aunt*; or climactic lines from Gilbert:—

"You have a daughter, Captain Reece,
Ten female cousins and a niece,
A Ma, if what I'm told is true,
Six sisters, and an aunt or two."

And the immortal song of which the refrain is:—

"And so do his sisters and his cousins and his aunts!"

There are, too, some aunts who hold their office by technicality, only. Siegfried's mother was his aunt, and Arthur's sister bore the same double relationship to Modred; so likewise (according to one version) did Dechtire to Cuchulainn. Technically, also, and legally, Hamlet's mother was his aunt.

When he has considered the manners and habitat of the book-aunt of yesterday, the sluggard might cast a glance at the book-aunt to-day. He would find her unchanged: age has withered none of her peculiarities or perquisites. But he would

find, too, that her shadow daily grows less. The fact is, the average modern story has no spare room for an aunt. The hero and heroine appear before the reader relationless, even parentless, backgroundless, past-and-futureless. The spot-light reveals one crisis, two persons, or three persons. And only occasionally, decently retired within the pages of children's books, or the novel that "reminds us of Thackeray," or "sounds a little like George Eliot," do we meet an aunt.

Why this state of things has come about may find its explanation in character-suicide, or in concentration for effect. But analysis of conditions is no part of the programme of a sluggard. If he has considered the ways of book-aunts, he is sufficiently wise.

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